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Marching Masters: Slavery, Race, and the Confederate Army During the Civil War

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Review

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Woodward, Colin *Marching Masters: Slavery, Race, and the Confederate Army During the Civil War*. University of Virginia Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780813935416

Plantation Masters at War

Colin Woodward's *Marching Masters* convincingly argues that to better "understand slavery during the American Civil War, historians must explore its role in the lives of Confederate soldiers" (p. 2). Scholars like James McPherson and Chandra Manning have demonstrated the benefits of reading the events of 1861-1865 through the lens of the soldiers who fought and died during that tremendous conflagration. Woodward, Archivist at the Center for Arkansas History and Culture at the University of Arkansas, grounds his research in an exhaustive reading of the historiography. His research draws upon archival sources primarily from Virginia, Louisiana, and North Carolina, as well as published memoirs and the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*.

Marching Masters might best be understood as an intellectual exploration of slavery's role as an institution and white southerners' experiences with enslaved African Americans. The chapters are chronological but organized around a series of central questions drawn from Civil War historiography. Woodward confirms that Confederate soldiers saw Republican political ascendancy as a direct threat to the institution of slavery and to the foundations of southern paternalism. Thus a Louisiana soldier could write home to his family that, "I am fighting for you all and for our Negroes and country" (p. 29). Claims such as these seem dissonant now, but reflected the widespread delusion that enslaved African Americans were content. Woodward also addresses the class tensions between slaveholding and poor whites as conscription laws allowed for the hiring of substitutes and exempted men who owned twenty or more slaves. Here Woodward argues that despite some grumbling from poor whites, slaveowners and would-be-slaveowners united in defense of "the peculiar institution." In later

chapters, he explores the impact of the Emancipation Proclamation on slave loyalty, the brutal racism of Confederate soldiers when confronted with black Union opponents, and the vexed question of arming slaves in the waning months of the war. These subjects will be familiar to those well versed in the history of the Civil War.

But *Marching Masters* does not simply tread upon paths well worn by earlier scholars. An exhaustive chapter outlines Confederate policies for impressing black labor in service of the war effort, underscoring the difficulties military leaders experienced when slaveowners proved reluctant to lend their workers to the cause. Woodward also devotes a chapter to the relationship between Confederate soldiers and the enslaved servants they brought with them on their campaigns. The presence of these slaves – tending to their master’s gear, foraging, cooking, and caring for the wounded – created a “sense of continuity” (p. 83) between home and battlefield. Slaveowning soldiers made their life at camp an extension of the plantation social world. They expressed concern for the welfare of their slaves back home, asking family members to send their love. And they recorded in detail the seeming depths of despair experienced by slaves whose masters died on the battlefield. Woodward reads these texts with considerable care, noting that masters discarded their paternalistic guise when necessity or whim overcame them. Enslaved African Americans, he notes, often wept not for their departed master, but for the misfortunes that might soon befall them and their own loved ones.

Woodward’s careful research, intriguing insights, and brisk prose all combine to make *Marching Masters* an important contribution to scholarship on the Confederacy. Yet it must be remembered that the sources that served as the foundation of Woodward’s research provide only white southerners’ perspectives. To place them in context, he relied upon the extensive corpus of Civil War historiography, but at times the narrative cried out for additional contemporary sources. While it convincingly explores Confederate soldiers’ views on slavery and race, for example, *Marching Masters* does not alter our understanding of the relationships between masters and the enslaved. Documents from the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, offering black perspectives on the master-slave relationship within Confederate encampments, might have provided a useful counterpoint to white southern soldiers’ letters about their slaves.

Another such moment occurs in the final chapter, which examines the postwar views of Confederate soldiers. Throughout chapters on the Civil War era, Woodward balances contemporary accounts with memoirs and other sources written decades later, attentive to the influence of the Lost Cause on southern memory. Enslaved African Americans appear regularly as characters in the Civil War drama, even if they can only be seen through Confederate soldiers' eyes. Yet in the memoirs they appear largely as caricatures. Woodward rightly dismisses the fiction of "Negro rule," but then pursues other topics based on the memoirs that take him somewhat far afield from his stated goal of exploring race and slavery. Black perspectives on Reconstruction would have provided this final chapter with a stronger focus.

Colin Woodward's *Marching Masters* nevertheless provides an extraordinary view into the world of Confederate soldiers. Thoroughly committed to slavery as the defining institution of their new nation, Confederate soldiers brought the "peculiar institution" with them as they fought the Union. They deplored Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation even as they believed that their own slaves would remain loyal. Extrapolating from their experience using violence to control enslaved workers, they treated black Union soldiers with brutality. As the Confederacy began to collapse, and Union troops enveloped southern plantations, so secure were they in their convictions that one officer observed that, the "negroes everywhere... have become much demoralized" (p. 182). Slaveowners, not the enslaved, were demoralized as the war drew to a close, but without Woodward's *Marching Masters* it would be difficult to understand why such an absurd claim made sense.

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